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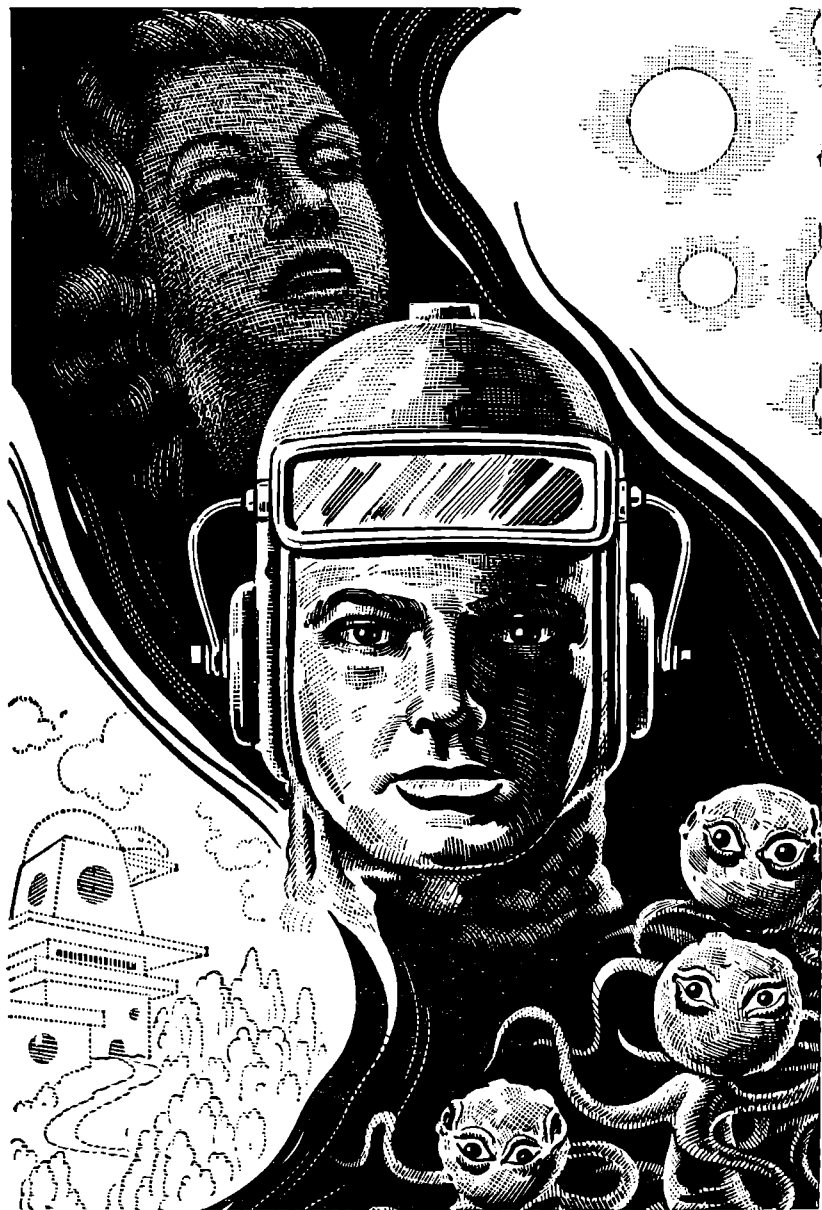
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WALK TO THE WORLD

A. J. B U D R Y S

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When a place becomes Home, it stops being the world. The world is somewhere else, where you can see new people and hear new voices, and where nobody talks about the price of socks.

Whenever it rained on weekends, my father would stand in front of the big window in the living room and face the wheat fields as they danced and rippled. He would look at the wheat, and beyond it at the mountains, with the big ashtray slowly filling beside him. His feet would carry him in a sort of shuffling dance, back and forth, and his hips would swing as though he were walking down the long road that ran through the fields to the mountains, and over and through the mountains to the city.

Those were the two things everybody noticed about my father: the way he loved to walk, and the way he smoked. He would set himself on the road, a

pack of cigarettes in both pockets of the faded TSN jumper with the frayed sleeves, and he would stride along with the swaying hill man's gait he had learned on Earth until one pack of cigarettes was gone. Then he would turn around and come home.

I guess people wondered about him. During the week he would be working out in the fields like our neighbors, but even then he would stop the tractor on top of a rise, sometimes, and stand up with one leg thrown around the gear levers to steady him, and look at the road going out to the mountains. He would put one of the expensive Earthside cigarettes between his lips and light

a match one-handed, touching it to the cigarette without looking. Then he would sit down in the saddle again, and the converter would go Whee! for a minute, until he remembered to put the motor in gear, and then the tractor would roll down the other side of the rise with the cultivator combing the earth behind it.

"John," he said to me once, when Mom was in the kitchen and we were sitting in the living room, "don't you ever wonder where the world is?"

"The world's right here, isn't it, Dad?" I said, wondering what he meant. "We're on it. It's the fourth planet from Wolf, and people have been on it for a hundred years."

He shook his head slowly, crossing his lean legs as he reached for a cigarette in his shirt pocket. "The world used to be here, son, when the first men came here, when the grass grew where the wheat grows now, when the wind rolled over this hill instead of splitting to go around the house. Before that, the world was on Centaurus, and before that—before Columbus—the world was America, and before that it was anywhere that wasn't plowed and tended."

He lit the cigarette and leaned back in the comfortable chair that surrounded him with

foam and cloth. "But none of those places are the world now. They've become places like New York and Risley, New Jersey, and Leyport and Rogersville, Simbala and Kenton's Landing, and all of them are called Home. Home is a familiar place, son. Home is where the hearth is, Home is where you hang your hat. Home is where every wide space between the boards on the floor has a memory of a lost pin to be dug out, where every loose hinge on a door brings back the feel of a knob to be lifted before it can be turned. Home is where the cooking tastes just right." He stopped to change the record in the phonograph, and I could hear Mom washing the dishes.

"But when a place becomes Home, it stops being the world. Son, have you ever felt you'd like to go out and see the world?"

I thought about that for a minute. "You mean, the world is always somewhere else?"

"Something like that. The world is where the cracks in the floorboards are just places where dust gathers, places where the doors stick, where you have to put salt in your food, or put an extra piece of ice in your drink. You can see the world, John. You can ride the big ships, like I did, and find the world. You can see the new people, and hear the new voices. You can wear

the strange clothes and live in the strange houses, and for a while you are seeing the world."

I remembered the picture that hung from a nail in the attic, a picture of a young man in a black and silver uniform, proud in his black boots and lieutenant's stripes, with little crinkles at the corners of his eyes that were crows' feet now.

"And then, one day, you reach out in the dark for the light switch, and you find it without fumbling. You lift your feet so you won't trip over the place where the carpet has curled up at one edge," he went on. "Your friends come in from the big ships, looking for a good time, and you guide them to it. You tell them which drinks are the good drinks, and which prices are the right prices. When two people pass by in the street, murmuring exotic words, glamorous words, in the lilting, singing language of the strange world, and your friends ask you, eyes glittering with intrigue, what mystery they were discussing, you can tell them they were talking about the price of socks." My father sighed. "As soon after that as you can, you leave your new home, and you seek the world anew."

"You mean, you can see the world, but you can't live in it

without its becoming Home."

"Not for very long, son."

My mother came out of the kitchen, drying her hands.

"How's your homework coming along, Johnnie?" she asked. I wanted to stay and talk to my father about the world, but she looked at me as if she knew I hadn't even started my history term paper, so I went upstairs and began working on it.

On sunny week-ends, or even when it was just not raining, my father would get up very early in the morning and put on his jumper. He would eat breakfast alone in the kitchen, and then he would go to the cabinet where the cartons of cigarettes were kept, and fill his pockets. He would go out of the house, closing the door hard to wake me, and walk down the road. I sometimes went to the window and watched him. He would look straight ahead of him, ignoring the wheat, swinging his arms, a cigarette in one hand leaving jagged curves of smoke in the air beside him.

At supper time he would be back with dust on his shoes, his hair ruffled. He would hang up the jumper, wash his hands, and sit down to eat. Sometimes my mother would tease him, and he would grin and tease her back, but sometimes she was very

quiet, and then he would be quiet too.

Once, when he was gone, my mother saw me standing in front of the window, smoking a cigarette, one of the local brands my father wouldn't touch. She came over to me and put an arm around me. "He likes to walk, doesn't he, Johnnie?" she said.

"He sure does," I answered, grinning.

"How about you, Johnnie? Do you like to walk, too?" For the first time I can remember, my mother's voice was anxious when she spoke to me.

"Shucks, Maw, I'm jest a little ol' country boy. Why should I want to go out and see the world?"

She shook her head. "You're Jack Gallery's son. Lieutenant John Gallery, Terrestrial Space Navy, Retired. And I retired him, Johnnie." She smiled, remembering.

"The first time I saw him, he was walking. He was striding up the path to the Port Director's office on Centaurus, his cap way back on his head, his heels hitting the ground hard, and he was coming off the ends of his toes, driving himself forward. His uniform was just a day too long unpressed, and the trim was cracked and blackened.

"I was looking out of the win-

dow, instead of transcribing a new set of directives as I should have been. I thought to myself, 'I wonder what's eating him!' The impatience trailed behind him and around him so thickly you could almost see it.

"In a few minutes, he was standing over my desk in the outer office.

"'Would you tell the Port Director that Lieutenant Gallery of the *Anzio* would like to see him.'

"'You're the captain of this vessel?'

"'I am.'

"'What do you wish to see the Port Director about?' I asked, although I knew the answer.

"'I want to submit a written request for review of a Condition of Vessel report,' he answered, and took a manila envelope from under his arm. His big knuckles were red and white, and there was a smudge of grease under one eye that gave him a glowering look.

"'Well, maybe I could give it to him,' I said. The *Anzio* had been red-lined the day before, and ordered to stand down until a new auxiliary drive could be fitted. Not even Jack Gallery, the darling of the TSN, according to at least one news service, could do anything about that.

"I guess he knew I was going to file his request and forget it,

because he shook his head. 'I'll give it to him myself,' he said.

"'Uh-huh. Look, Lieutenant, if you want to put yourself in a high sling, that's your business, and I'll tell the Director you're here, but I transcribed that order myself, and I know the decision's airtight. Nobody, and that includes Jack Gallery, is going to bust in on the Port Director of a very busy station and convince him otherwise.'

"I saw him start to simmer down, so I said very gently, 'And Lieutenant—there's grease on your face. I don't think he'd like that on top of your second best uniform.'

"So he never got to see the Port Director, but he did take me out long enough to give me an excuse to go to him almost every day when they brought him back to the Base Hospital a year later. He got the Medal of Honor for that wound of his, and the world it won for the Union.

"When he married me, he retired. He acted just like he did the time they red-lined his ship, but I finally convinced him.

"And that's the way your father is," my mother finished with a sigh. She squeezed my hand.

"So that's why you don't want me to take any long hikes," I said; I'd been wondering.

"I didn't say that, Johnnie, I never said that." Her deep eyes were turned away from me. Then she let go of my hand and walked quickly into the kitchen.

I stood at the window, looking past the wheat at the mountains, and far off, just at the big rise the road makes before it dips down into the valley below our house, I saw my father, the faded jumper black against the yellow dust, walking.

"I've taken you up to the mountaintop, John. Now I'm going to show you the world," my father said.

The road fell away from us, blacktopped now, and went into the city.

"That's Skyrtis City," my father said, although he knew I knew that. "The road runs into Skyrtis and becomes a street. The street leads to the spaceport."

I could see the flat white concrete plain on the other side of the buildings.

"The big ships leave the spaceport and go to the stars. Most of them go Home, but some of them go out to find a world." He stopped to light a cigarette. The wind pushed the jumper against his back and fluttered its open front. The match flared against his thumb, and he muttered, very softly, "Damn!"

"The ships go farther every day to find the world," my father continued, "For wherever men go, they build their houses and lay their streets, or they learn the strange languages, or they conquer the beings of these worlds, and the world becomes Home."

"So this road leads to the world," I said, watching a ship, all black and gold, sunlit, threading its way into the sky.

"You can walk toward the mountains from our house," my father replied. "And stand here looking at Skyrtis and the spaceport, and watch the ships going out. And that way, the road leads to the world." His eyes, too, were on the ship as it pushed through a cloud and broke out above it. "But, when you turn around, finally, and you see the road kinking through the wheat, then this road leads to Home." He coughed a little and threw the cigarette away. "Time to be getting back," he said.

We walked down the road, my father and I, his strides long and effortless, mine as long, but not as free and swinging. He had that walk from his father, he told me once, and I saw the old man, thin-bodied, in wash-bleached denims, crossing the pine-topped hills. That was the only way I pictured my grandfather, a picture of a man travel-

ing over the top of the hills.

It wasn't long after that the purring, catlike car came over the mountains and to our house, bending the wheat away from the black and silver fenders. A uniformed man drove the car, and another man rode in the back, looking at the fields and the house. He was about as old as my father, with the same lines at the eyes, but he wore a vice-admiral's uniform on sagging shoulders and tightly over his stomach. My father met him and took him into the house while the driver cramped his car into a circle and went back over the mountains.

"Hello, Bill," my father said. He shook the admiral's hand warmly, but his eyes, warm too, had something strange in them. "What's brought you out here?"

"No hurry about that, Jack," the admiral said, and I thought his voice was too accustomed to giving orders, but I liked him nevertheless. "How's Marion? And your son? Lord, he's a man!" He shook my hand, and looked at my father. "He looks like you," he said, and I liked him even more, but still I was not sure if I always would.

My mother came into the room, and for a moment, when she saw the admiral, she hesitated at the threshold and looked at my father too rapidly for him to

feel. But then she walked quickly across the room and took the admiral's hand. "Bill! How are you? And you used to swear they'd Summary Court you before you got too old to make reckless decisions!"

"Luck, I guess, Marion. And how're you?"

"Oh, fine," she said, and then she asked the same question my father had, in her own way. "Don't tell me they're giving you a week-end in the country along with the simply fabulous pay you must be drawing."

"You might say I was combining business with pleasure," he answered. "This is a beautiful house you have."

"Built it ourselves," my father said, and I could see that he and my mother knew their old friend well enough not to press him.

That was the way they spent the afternoon. Father showed him the land, and mother cooked supper. The admiral looked at everything, admiring the crop, enthusiastically praising the swimming in the valley stream, chuckling over the antics of the pups in the yard. Mother kept rattling pots in the kitchen, opening cabinets, closing drawers, thumbing the recipe book, busily. As I watched her and helped set the table, I saw she was keeping herself far too busy, even for a guest for supper.

"Mom," I said, "do you think Dad'll be taking an extra long walk?"

"Getting pretty smart, aren't you?" she said, looking up from a low cabinet. She straightened up, sighing. "He's getting pretty old for hiking, isn't he?"

"It's hard to say."

"It is, isn't it, Johnny? Very hard." She said it so that it was more than a cliché, and meant what it actually said. She went busily back to the stove.

Supper was a quiet meal. Every time either my mother, my father, or the admiral would raise their heads, I could see the uncertain looks in their eyes. Finally it was over, and we went into the living room. The admiral sat down facing the three of us.

"Jack, Marion, I've known you both for a long time, and there's no sense beating around," he said. Both mother and father sat quietly in their chairs, but they were quiet in different ways. "We used to think, back on Centaurus, that nothing would ever stop Jack Gallery." He said it matter of factly, and I had never been so proud of my father before.

"Well, nothing ever did," he went on. "You could have stayed in the service, Jack. That wound wasn't anything big. When you retired, you were still the

champ."

And now you need the champ again, I thought. Somewhere, something needs to be done.

I think my mother would have said something, but my father put out his hand and touched hers.

"What I'm going to tell you is a military secret, Jack. You'll be going back to school soon, Young Jack. Remember not to talk about it."

Nobody had even called me that before.

"You know how we operate, Jack. The Union centers on Earth, and we send our ships in toward the center of the galaxy, fanning out so that we're gradually biting a chunk out of the galactic rim and making it ours." He leaned forward a bit. "Well, somebody else has the same idea."

"No!" my father exclaimed, and the look on his face was eagerness. "I used to tell you that'd happen someday." The admiral nodded. My mother looked at my father, but I don't understand how I could know that, because her face was in a shadow.

"They're a little farther in than we are, and their ships seem to be slower, or else they're not hustling like we are. Anyway, the damndest thing happened. One of our ships grounded on a planet two days after they

landed. Can you imagine that? Our ships buzzing around for months in that sector, and theirs doing the same thing, and not noticing each other?"

"Sounds like they've got an entirely different type of drive," my father said. "If that's true, then their whole concept of electronics must be different. Are they humanoid?"

"Human, or so close to it the difference isn't apparent. And about that drive—you always were a jump ahead of me, weren't you?—you're right, and about their science, too."

"Okay then, what's your problem? We've got all kinds of contact teams primed for just this situation," my father asked.

"They won't talk to us."

"Hostile?"

"Hostile! They haven't even got sidearms on those ships. It's been something like a thousand years since they had a war, and that, from the little they tell us, was more of a ritualistic affair with fixed combat areas, umpires, and a predetermined armistice date."

"Are you kidding?"

"I wish I was. Anytime somebody makes a pass at them, they just go away and leave him alone. They figure space is plenty big enough for everybody." The admiral gripped the arms of his

chair in frustration. "All of which is a fine and dandy way to live, but they're figuring to do just that to us. Turn around and go home."

"What on Earth for? Somebody accidentally fire something in their direction?"

"Not even that. Trouble is, their ships are privately operated. If one of them decides the grass is greener on the other side of the galaxy, he just packs and takes off with the wife and kids and anybody else that feels like tagging along. They go where they please, just drifting around until they find a likely looking world, and then they settle on it, if the natives don't mind. If there's room, he sends out a call for anybody else that's interested, they set up a trading colony, and after two or three hundred years the world's assimilated into their federation."

"Well, look, if this is just one tribe, or whatever, maybe their government's not as huffy as they are. Not that I see why they shouldn't be friendlier themselves. Maybe they just feel they can't speak for the whole federation," my father said, puzzled.

"With humans, you could say that, but not with these cookies. Each and every one of them's a member of their government. What they've got, actually, is a

perfectly co-ordinated anarchy, if you can imagine such a thing. They've got some kind of instantaneous communication, and every one of them carries a personal transceiver. Yeah—powered for interstellar distances. Everybody knows what everybody else is doing, and the system works fine, for them." The admiral's jaws clamped together. "So naturally, being so lily pure and untrammled, they refuse to have anything to do with anything as inherently aggressive as a military organization."

"Did you explain to them that our economic and social structure won't let it be handled any other way?"

"I did. They want to know what we want with all that territory, then. Am I supposed to explain the paradoxes of human motives to these holier-than-thous?"

I didn't have time to consider the paradoxes of military thinking, because I realized, finally, what the admiral wanted. So did my father, and my mother must have guessed long before.

"You want me to talk to them?" my father asked quietly. My mother didn't say anything.

"I'm not trying to say please, Jack. You're the man for the job. If Jack Gallery can't explain it, it can't be done. If we don't

find *some* common ground, we'll lose them, and if we lose them, two thirds of our frontier is blocked off. We may not be little lambs of God, but we can't blast our way through them, and that's the only way they'll let us do it."

Oh, give yourself fifty years, admiral, I thought. Let fifty years of respect for the rights of another civilization hold you back. Let the pressure build up, and then see if you won't cut those peaceful strangers to ribbons. The world lies beyond them, admiral, and wherever men go, the places they reach become home, so that the world is always somewhere else, and must be reached.

"What happens if I say no?" my father asked, still in an even voice. There was a sound from my mother's chair, the sound people make when they start to speak and then think better of it.

"We find somebody else that isn't as good," the admiral said.

"There's no sense telling you I don't know there's a lot to hold you back," the admiral said, and I hated him. "Think it over and let me know tomorrow."

My father took his eyes from the mountains. "Sure, Bill. I'll let you know."

Tell him now, I thought. Why

not, why waste the Admiral's time, why hold back human progress? Tell him you'll go out and look at this whole set of new worlds he's offering you on a silver platter. You'll do it tomorrow anyhow. But all that time I was shouting inside, I was hoping he wouldn't.

My mother got up from the chair. How does a woman get up, what is it she does, that tells everyone in sight that there is something special, something dramatic, in this arising? The admiral's eyes locked on her, and my father's, too.

She walked into the kitchen. I heard her open the cabinet, and when she came back the jumper was over her arm and the half-case of Earthside cigarettes was held out in front of her.

"Here," she said, My father got up, his face half surprised, but half grateful, too. They stood together, the cigarettes and the jumper on the floor between them, and they did not speak.

The admiral got to his feet. "You don't have to be that quick about it, Marion," he said, but his voice was relieved.

"Shut up, you calculating machine," my mother said. "That's all you are. You got in a jam and you reached back in the files and pulled out the right folder. Well,

he's yours," she said scornfully. "But I don't think he'll perform in exactly the way you'd like him to. He'll solve it all for you, all right, but it won't be the way you and Jack Gallery solved things twenty years ago."

"Marion! Don't take that attitude. You're just upset," the admiral said. My mother looked at him, and he dropped his eyes. My father didn't say anything. He put on the jumper and took the cigarettes out to the porch. The admiral went outside when my father came back in to say goodbye.

My mother and I watched the growling car escape from our yard.

"He'll be back in a few months," I said.

"Yes, he'll be back," my mother answered me. "Ten years ago, I wouldn't have let him go. Ten years ago he was still like the admiral. He wanted to see the world."

Father had never told her about the search for the world, because she knew how he felt without needing words from him, but it surprised me to hear her using his exact phrase.

"The men of Earth go out," my mother said, "and they seek the world. The world must be new, unknown, an adventure, a thing to be discovered and conquered. But they come home,

Johnnie, like he always came home from the mountains."

"But when you turn around, finally, this road leads to Home," my father had told me and I understood, at last, that sometimes you walk to the mountains and the world just for the sake of being able to turn around and come home.

"The admiral—did you notice how he talked, Johnnie? Either we push through them, or we stop dead. Remember?" my mother asked. "But Jack and I were thinking about the thing the admiral never considered." She put an arm around my waist and held me strongly. "We can join them, Johnnie. They aren't very different from us, for they search for the world too. And we will go out to their worlds, and they will come to ours, for the world is anywhere, John, where you haven't been."

I thought of my father, talking to the strangers, and they would understand each other.

I kissed my mother, and looked at our home, which was warm and comfortable. How foolish, I thought, to go out to the world, if you will always come Home again.

"I'll never walk to the mountains, Mom," I said, struck by my revelation, but mother looked at me with eyes wiser than mine.